

Message Text

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PAGE 01 LONDON 05850 01 OF 02 072013Z
ACTION EUR-12

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FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2518
SECDEF WASHDC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 05850

DEFENSE FOR ISA AND DSAA

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: UK MASS
SUBJECT: ECONOMIST ARTICLE ON ARMS SALES

THE ECONOMIST OF 9 APRIL UNDER THE HEADING "GUNS
AREN'T ALWAYS WRONG" PUBLISHES THE FOLLOWING ARTICLE
ON ARMS SALES WHICH WE QUOTE IN FULL.

QUOTE WEAPONS AND WARS ARE NOT CHICKENS AND EGGS:
WARS CAUSE WEAPONS, NOT THE OTHER WAY ROUND. PRESIDENT
CARTER ALMOST CERTAINLY REALISES THIS, EVEN THOUGH SOME
OF HIS PRE-ELECTION STATEMENTS OWED A LOT TO THE
RHETORIC OF ARMS CONTROL, WHICH SOMETIMES MIXES THINGS
UP. NOW HE HAS TO CONVERT INTO HARD POLICIES HIS
INSTINCTIVE IF SLIGHTLY INCOHERENT DESIRE TO CUT THE
SALES OF AMERICAN ARMS TO OTHER COUNTRIES.

MR. CARTER'S FIRST TEST CAME BEFORE THE CONVERSION
WAS COMPLETED. PRESIDENT SADAT OF EGYPT, VISITING
WASHINGTON ON APRIL 3RD TO 5TH, ASKED FOR SOME AMERICAN
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PAGE 02 LONDON 05850 01 OF 02 072013Z

FIGHTER-BOMBERS. MR. SADAT DOES NOT WANT TO GO BACK
TO THE RUSSIANS CAP IN HAND FOR THE AIRCRAFT HE NEEDS
TO IMPROVE HIS AIR FORCE, AND HE WANTS A SYMBOL OF
AMERICAN SUPPORT TO MAINTAIN HIS AUTHORITY BOTH INSIDE
EGYPT AND IN THE ARAB WORLD. BUT ISRAEL, AND THE
ISRAELI LOBBY IN AMERICA, WOULD HATE ANY EXTRA ARMS
SALES TO EGYPT. MR. CARTER WILL NO DOUBT FIND A WAY OF

SLIDING ROUND THIS PROBLEM. MR. SADAT'S REQUEST IS A FAIRLY MODEST ONE; AND EGYPT IS, AFTER ALL, A RATHER SPECIAL CASE. BUT, WHATEVER MR. CARTER DECIDES, THIS DECISION WILL NOT BE MUCH OF A GUIDE TO ARMS SALES POLICY IN GENERAL.

THERE ARE TWO BASIC APPROACHES TO THE SUBJECT. ONE IS THE ATTEMPT TO CREATE UNIVERSALLY APPLICABLE RULES. THE OTHER IS AD HOCERY, THE MORE SENSIBLE BELIEF THAT EACH CASE CAN BE, AND HAS TO BE, TREATED INDIVIDUALLY.

AT ONE EXTREME OF THE UNIVERSAL-RULES APPROACH IS A POLICY OF STRAIGHT LAISSER FAIRE: SELL ANYTHING TO ANYONE WHO CAN PAY. THIS HAS THE ADVANTAGE OF SIMPLICITY, AND WHAT SOME PEOPLE WOULD REGARD AS THE VIRTUE OF A HANDWASHING ABSTENTION FROM MORALISM. BUT NO COUNTRY CAN BE EXPECTED TO SELL ARMS TO ITS ADVERSARIES, OR TO FRIENDS OF ITS ADVERSARIES, OR TO ADVERSARIES OF ITS FRIENDS. IT IS ALSO, UNFORTUNATELY, SOMETIMES RATHER DIFFICULT TO TELL ONE FROM THE OTHER. THAT IS WHY IT IS HARD TO KEEP ANY ATTEMPT AT A UNIVERSAL SET OF RULES ON THE TRACKS FOR VERY LONG; AND IF THE RULES CHANGE TOO OFTEN, THE ARMS BUYERS TEND TO WORRY ABOUT THE NEXT CHANGE OF POLICY AND BEGIN TO BUILD UP AN EXCESSIVELY WASTEFUL HOARD OF WEAPONS IN CASE THE SELLER CHANGES HIS MIND NEXT YEAR. THERE ARE SIGNS THAT IRAN HAS ALREADY DONE THIS.

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PAGE 03 LONDON 05850 01 OF 02 072013Z

AT THE OTHER EXTREME THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST SELLING ANY WEAPONS AT ALL CAN BE COUNTERED EQUALLY EASILY. IT IS SAID THAT ARMS COST MONEY WHICH THE PURCHASING COUNTRY COULD SPEND BETTER FOR NON-MILITARY PURPOSES. BUT THE UNHAPPY FACT IS THAT MOST COUNTRIES, IF DENIED ARMS THEY WANT FROM ONE SELLER, WILL SPEND THE MONEY ON BUYING THEM FROM SOMEWHERE ELSE. SOME PEOPLE DISLIKE SELLING ARMS BECAUSE THEY KILL. BUT IN FACT MODERN CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS TEND TO BE LESS DESTRUCTIVE OF LIFE THAN THE OLDER ONES WERE. IT IS CLAIMED THAT THE POSSESSION OF MODERN ARMS MAKES A COUNTRY LIABLE TO ATTACK ITS NEIGHBOUR. BUT A BALANCE OF POWER CAN IN FACT PREVENT A WAR. AND SO ON.

THE ANTI-SIMPLISTIC TRUTH SEEMS TO BE THAT THERE IS NO GOOD GENERAL RULE WHICH CAN APPLY TO ALL SUCH SALES. MR. CARTER IS PROBABLY RIGHT TO BELIEVE THAT THE UNITED STATES HAS BEEN SELLING TOO MANY WEAPONS TO

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PAGE 01 LONDON 05850 02 OF 02 072011Z
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UNCLAS SECTION 02 OF 02 LONDON 05850

THE MIDDLE EAST IN RECENT YEARS. IRAN, SAUDI ARABIA
AND KUWAIT NOW HAVE MORE ARMS THAN THEIR SOLDIERS CAN
HANDLE. ISRAEL HAS GOT SO MUCH IN RECENT YEARS THAT IT
PROBABLY DOES NOT NEED A GREAT DEAL MORE IN THE NEAR
FUTURE. EGYPT'S CALL ON THE AMERICAN ARMS MARKET IS
LIMITED BY ITS POVERTY, AND BY THE FACT THAT ITS ARMED
FORCES STILL RELY OVERWHELMINGLY ON SOVIET WEAPONS.

BUT OUTSIDE THE MIDDLE EAST IT IS HARD TO SUSTAIN
THE ARGUMENT THAT THE VOLUME OF ARMS SALES IS GROWING.
IN REAL TERMS, AFTER ALLOWING FOR INFLATION, THE VALUE
OF AMERICAN ARMS SALES TO THE WHOLE OF THE REST OF THE
WORLD--THE MIDDLE EAST APART--IS ROUGHLY THE SAME AS
TEN YEARS AGO. AND BECAUSE MANY INDIVIDUAL ITEMS ARE
COSTING MORE IN REAL TERMS, PROBABLY FEWER WEAPONS ARE
ACTUALLY BEING TRANSFERRED.

THE INTELLIGENT USE OF ARMS SALES CAN BE A PROPER
TOOL OF FOREIGN POLICY, AS MR. HENRY KISSINGER
DEMONSTRATED. THAT HE MAY SOMETIMES HAVE MISCALCULATED
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PAGE 02 LONDON 05850 02 OF 02 072011Z

IS NO REASON TO THROW THE TOOL AWAY. BUT MR. CARTER
WILL HAVE TO DECIDE EACH REQUEST ON ITS MERITS. THERE
IS NO GOLDEN RULE WHICH COVERS THEM ALL.

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